Uintah-Ouray Braves End Annual Sun Dance

When darkness came to the sun dance grounds at Whiterocks Friday night, the half-century-old sun dance of the Uintah-Ouray resevation was again started and continued until Monday morning.

During this period the dancers may neither eat nor drink. From 15 to 20 dancers began the dance Friday night. The belief is that the ceremony will bring new life and blessings from the Sun God, free the tribe from sickness and famine, bring sufficient rain to make the grass grow and assure an abundance of food.

Indians from all over the reservation, population about 1200, brought their families to the dance and camped in tents near the vicinity of the dance Three tribes, gathered for the occasion, were the Ute, Uncompahgre and the White River Indians. Oran Curry and Mrs. John Pawwinnpa, son and daughter of the squaw man, always are in attendance at these dances.

The sun dance is sacred and signifies rebirth. The same plot is never used twice, but the poles are left standing, so that numerous poles may be seen around the dance grounds where similar ceremonies have been conducted for the years past. While much of the dance is sacred tribal ceremony, the public is allowed to watch certain ceremonies. No photographs are permitted to be taken of the dance nor the participants.

The dance begins when the singers and the drummers, followed by the Indian braves, who are dancers, march around the outside of the enclosure which is built 10 feet high of branches and leaves.

Anyone who is sick is permitted to go in and join the dance, for the Indians have faith in the healing power of the ceremony. After marching around the enclosure three times, the braves enter, In the center is a transplanted tree, with forked top and from the tree fork 12 poles extend out and reach the wall like a wagon wheel with sawed off spokes.

The legend of the dance is that once in a period of famine a brave ventured forth with a female companion to search for his tribe. While hunting he encountered a deity, who, after the brave had fasted, taught him the ceremony. The brave returned to the tribe and taught the ceremony to members of the tribe who then preformed the dance and thus brought relief from famine through the appearance of a herd of buffalo.

Whistling accompanying the dance symbolizes the breath of life of man, and at the same time the cry of the thunderbird. Fasting and other denials practiced during the dance are penance to obtain special favor of the gods and represent the fast of the originator of the ceremony.

By A. N. Kimball